

The Teagle Foundation

FRESH THINKING NEWSLETTER - AUGUST 2008



Dear Colleagues,

We at the Teagle Foundation are delighted that our "Fresh Thinking" program--launched nearly four years ago--has yielded a series of White Papers that address important issues for student learning. The essay below is intended as a guide to the best of this work. We hope you'll read it, maybe follow some of the links to the papers themselves, and let us know what you think!

Donna Heiland
Vice President



FRESH THINKING FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION:

Knowledge and Know-How for Student Learning

"What beautiful hyacinths!--I have just learnt to love a hyacinth."

"And how might you learn?--By accident or argument?"

". . . I cannot tell how." (Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey)

The Teagle Foundation's [Fresh Thinking](#) program aims to do exactly what the name implies: provide support for the development of fresh approaches to liberal education. We well know how many "new" things have been tried over the years, even as we also know the potential danger of privileging the new over the tried and true. And yet we also understand that--as fine as American colleges and universities may be--they can always be better. The very qualities that they seek to foster in their students--the ability to couple imagination with disciplined work, to find new ways to solve old problems--are those that can be harnessed to move the institutions themselves forward. And those are the qualities that characterize the projects that we have funded over the past three years.

Taken as a group, the papers posted on the [Foundation's website](#) offer a pointed and coherent analysis of key issues. Did we know this would happen? We hoped it would but we couldn't be sure. We designed this program to be open to the serendipitous and strategic at the same time: we aimed to make space for grantees to identify issues that we might not have come to on our own and at the same time worked to ensure that their work would be rigorous, action-oriented, and useful to people on their own campuses and others too. We welcomed both accident and argument, in other words, and are happy to report some good results.

These projects generated knowledge--or more accurately, what Teagle's president, [Bob](#)

[Connor](#), likes to call "know-how"--about how we can strengthen college-level teaching and learning. And the [White Papers](#) that we call to your attention now make that knowledge available and accessible. We invite you to browse through them, see if they can be of use to you, and to let us know if they are (that information will be useful to us as we develop future programming).

Here's what you'll find:

STUDIES OF HOW PEOPLE LEARN

- [Barnard College](#) and [Pace University](#) led a working group in "The [River Summer](#) that tested a "metacognitive pedagogy"—that is, a pedagogy linking research about how people learn to teaching strategies derived from that knowledge—by convening successive groups of faculty in an interdisciplinary study of the Hudson River. The "classroom" consisted of the river itself, the river valley, and a research boat called The Seawolf that took faculty from various institutions, and in various disciplines, down the full length of the river. Faculty on the boat "acted as teachers, students, or both" as they experimented with different ways of teaching and learning about the Hudson River, and the resulting [White Paper](#) documents successful strategies for "active" pedagogies proven to strengthen student learning.
- A working group led by The [Social Science Research Council](#) explored the by-now established but still less than fully understood phenomenon of interdisciplinarity in undergraduate education. 109 colleges and universities responded to a survey about interdisciplinary programming on their campuses, generating richly informative data. One important fact: nearly all of the institutions perceived themselves as "very successful," "successful," or "somewhat successful" at "offering quality interdisciplinary education," yet "over two thirds . . . requested assistance with assessment" of interdisciplinary education. This [White Paper](#) responds to that request by offering a range of "value-added and performance-based approaches" to the assessment of interdisciplinary learning that can serve as a good starting point for campuses wanting to do this work.

STUDIES OF WHERE PEOPLE LEARN

- What difference does place make? Arguing that students (and the rest of us) benefit from thoughtful engagement in the places they live even as they must also be able to view those places with a critical / analytical eye, a [Calvin College](#) working group spent over a year studying how to ensure that this happens. The resulting [White Paper](#) moves from a historical / theoretical discussion of how and why institutions might want to develop a "pedagogy of place," to analysis of data consolidated from interviews with faculty, students, alumni and civic / community leaders on Calvin's own engagement with Grand Rapids, Michigan (where it is located), and then to a series of thirteen case studies that map out--in a range of disciplines--just what such a pedagogy might look like. The case studies and the concluding recommendations, in particular, will be valuable to any institution grappling with similar questions.
- From local to global: preparing students to succeed in a global society is a goal regularly acknowledged by colleges and universities. How to achieve that goal is another question and at [Mount Holyoke College](#), study abroad--for every undergraduate--is an important part of the answer. A working group of "faculty, students, administrators and alumnae" met over a year and a half to study key issues raised by study abroad. The resulting [White Paper](#) documents the college's efforts in this area, with attention to current research as well as "best practices in the field," and will be useful to any institution seeking to address these issues. Key findings affirm "the importance of a coordinated and integrative process and strategy" for the enhancement

of study abroad and "the pivotal role of the faculty in making many of the critical steps in the expansion of learning abroad happen."

STUDIES OF WHAT PEOPLE LEARN

- [Northwestern University](#) convened a forum to explore American popular culture's fascination with the Ancient Greeks and Romans. Why engage with these cultures and why now? Academics who see in liberal education a form of education dedicated to democratic values will want to read [Daniel Mendelsohn's](#) analysis of our persistent misreading of Greek drama--especially our inability to apprehend the political force of Greek tragedy--as a phenomenon linked to the status of democratic values in our society. Educators focused on questions of equity in higher education will find new frameworks for thought in [Danielle Allen's](#) interrogation of notions of merit as a means to excellence in films like *Gladiator*. And [Kirk Ormand's](#) response to these papers challenges us to think about how Classics has survived--and will survive--as a discipline. Talks are available in [print](#) and [podcast](#) versions.
- A [Yale University](#)-led consortium of nine Connecticut colleges, universities and community colleges explored the value of special library collections for liberal education. A [White Paper](#) offers an engaging account of the group's collaborative efforts in this area and is also a guide to the [project website](#). The website will be especially useful to people wanting to tap into a community interested in using special collections in teaching, wanting to learn what collections are available in Connecticut, and wanting to know more about oral history, the use of images in teaching, and about partnering with various kinds of cultural institutions.

THINKING ABOUT THE CURRICULUM

- At a time when public discussion of higher education is focused on student learning outcomes across institutions and can seem less than fully aware of the diversity of institutional types, the [Brown University](#) working group's [study of the open curriculum](#) speaks strongly to the value--and the workings--of this "important alternative tradition in liberal education." A follow-up report on [best practices in advising](#)--so crucial for the open curriculum to succeed--provides evidence on what works and what doesn't.

A LOOK AT HOW WE DEVELOP AND SUPPORT THE STRONGEST FACULTY FOR OUR STUDENTS

- Developing the "professoriate of the future" is the goal of [Lawrence University's](#) postdoctoral [fellowship program](#). Programs designed along these lines are not entirely new to academia, but this one stands out for the priority assigned to it by the institution; for its framing as a program that benefits both the fellows (who get on the ground preparation for academic careers) and the college (the intellectual life of which is enhanced in multiple ways by the fellows' presence); for the rigor of its selection process, which brings a multi-disciplinary cohort of fellows to campus each year; and for its thoughtful self-assessment. A two-year [study of the program's effectiveness](#) can serve as a guide to colleges interested in developing a similar program and more generally "as a model for developing and strengthening connections between premier liberal arts colleges and leading research universities."
- If undergraduate learning is what a college education is all about, why should institutions of higher learning use precious resources to support faculty research? An [American Council of Learned Societies](#) Working Group on "[Scholar-Teachers and Student Learning](#)" argues for the multiple ways that the former benefits from the latter, drawing on original research from the Indiana University [Center for Postsecondary](#)

[Research](#), and laying out an agenda for further work in this area. Listen to a [podcast](#) of [George Kuh](#), of Indiana University, talk with Teagle Foundation President Bob Connor about this study.

EXPLORATIONS OF RELIGION ON CAMPUS

- What does religion have to do with the academy? A lot. The "renewed religious engagements of today's undergraduates" are much talked about but less understood. The [Social Science Research Council](#) provides resources for those who want to know more about this subject: a [forum](#) on that brings together essays by "leading authorities in the field of religion and higher education" and a [guide](#) derived from the essays and designed as "an overview for college faculty and administrators." A Teagle Foundation [blog](#) on the topic also contributes to this ongoing dialogue.
- Colleges exist to promote intellectual inquiry and yet some subjects can so deeply charged that productive engagement with them is difficult. At the [College of St. Benedict / St. John's University](#), gender and sexuality are hot-button issues. A campus-based working group spent over a year researching the dynamics of conversations on these issues, and the resulting White Paper--"[Controversial Conversations at a Faith-Based Liberal Arts College](#)"--is a rigorous study of the conditions that make such conversations successful. Sociologist [Sheila Nelson spoke](#) with Teagle Foundation Vice President Donna Heiland about the group's work, about one particularly heartening conversation that took place on the CSB/SJU campus, and about the value of this work for other institutions.

ANALYSES OF RACE AND ETHNICITY AS BOTH SHAPING FORCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND SUBJECTS OF STUDY

- A working group headed by [Cornell University](#) studied what is arguably the next major challenge for colleges and universities focused on diversifying their student bodies: ensuring that minority students not only survive but thrive through four years of college. Cornell teamed up with four colleges in upstate New York (Colgate, Hamilton, Hobart & William Smith, and Wells), examined existing literature on this subject, and looked at what each institution actually did to achieve this goal. This [report](#) highlights especially promising programs, takes the important step of identifying ways to assess whether or not they are achieving their goals, and includes appendices that review relevant literature, list summer programs as well as mentoring and cultural centers, and offer a selection of online diversity statements.
- [Washington University in St. Louis](#) headed a working group focused on the teaching of ethnicity as an important contributor "to the civic mission of the university." To teach students "to understand ethnicity more deeply" is also to "improve the quality of their democratic citizenship." This [White Paper](#) offers both a theoretical analysis of ethnicity from the perspectives of humanities and social sciences, and a series of short essays focused on strategies for the teaching of ethnicity. Notably, group members piloted and assessed the effectiveness of these pedagogies in a series of "test bed" courses, with results that will be useful to many classroom teachers, as will the working bibliography included at the end of the paper.

Of course these categories are not hard and fast. The controversial conversations that took place at the College of St. Benedict / St. John's University had everything to do with the specific place in which they occurred; pedagogies of ethnicity surely pertain both to how people learn and what they learn; how one encourages the use of special collections bears some connection to whether one's institution has an open curriculum or a prescribed set of core courses.

Still, when all is said and done, these papers cluster around a set of issues at the heart of liberal education in the United States today, and while they are not the only issues of importance, they surely constitute an important subset. So read them, enjoy them, let us know whether you find them useful (you can write to us at dheiland@teaglefoundation.org). And stay tuned. More work from our Fresh Thinking program is coming soon.

-- Donna Heiland

All Fresh Thinking White Papers for Liberal Education, as well as other resources that can help improve student learning on your campus, are available on our website.

www.teagle.org

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